30% of wetland cover lost - ministry

Encroachers. The government attributed the decline to "greedy Ugandans" whom he said have grabbed and converted the swamps for different uses.

BY PAUL TAJUBA

ptajuba@ug.nationmedia.com

KAMPALA. Uganda has lost 30 per cent of its wetland cover in the last 20 years, the ministry of Water and Environment has said.

Mr Paul Mafabi, the director of environment, said yesterday in an interview ahead of the World Wetlands Day on Friday that although wetlands and forests contribute 40 per cent to rainfall formation in the country among other functions, Uganda is fast losing its marshland.

"If you compare with 1994, wetlands were covering about 15 per cent of the land surface area. Today, we have between only eight and nine per cent [wetland coverage]. So we have lost a minimum of 30 per cent of our wetlands over a period of 15 to 20 years," Mr Mafabi said.

Environment minister Sam Cheptoris attributed the declining wetland coverage to "greedy Ugandans" whom he said have grabbed and converted the swamps for different uses, including for construction of homes, farms, and factories.

"Consequently, we have experienced increased flooding, reduced water quality and quantity, including drying up of water sources, diseases...," Mr Cheptoris said at his office in Luzira, a Kampala suburb.



Environment degradation: A section of Lubigi Wetland in Kampala that had been invaded by traders in 2011. FILE PHOTO

He urged urban authorities to integrate wetlands into urban planning and police formulation.

"Conserving wetlands is an enormous task that cannot only be done by my ministry alone. It requires each of you to contribute to different programmes and be a mouthpiece to these voiceless yet critical natural resource," he added.

Mr Cheptoris warned that those who have converted wetlands to other land uses or have acquired titles will soon lose everything.

"It is illegal to have titles in wetlands. It is just a matter of time. They may put up structure illegally at night, but the law will catchup with them. That I can assure you," he said.

A 2017 joint water and environment sector review report indicates that with an estimated 10.9 per cent wetland cover of Uganda, the ministry has demarcated 167.7 hectares of critical wetlands and restored at least 476 hectares.

Mr Cheptoris said environment protection has been hampered by manpower challenges of environment police, but said a number of wetlands are being restored across the country.

World Wetlands Day is celebrated annually on February 2, marking the date of adoption of the convention on wetlands in 1971, in the Iranian city of Ramsar.

This year's celebrations will be held in Arua District under the theme: "Wetlands for a Sustainable Urban Future".

BENEFITS OF WETLANDS

Wetlands filter water from pollutants with its vegetation cover, especially papyrus, acting as raw material in crafts making and as habitant for several creatures such as birds and reptiles that not only act as a tourist attraction but also balance the ecosystem.